

UNCLAS COLOMBO 000201
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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: Northern Sri Lanka SitRep 18

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11. (SBU) Summary: On September 20, Sri Lankan Air Defenses shot down two light planes sent by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on suicide missions to attack targets in the Colombo area. The planes narrowly missed their targets. The visit by UN U/SYG John Holmes made clear to both the Government and the LTTE that the international community is concerned about the treatment of conflict-affected civilians. The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) completed its fourth evacuation of wounded civilians from the safe zone on February 21; Government health facilities are reportedly overstretched by health needs of conflict-affected civilians. End summary.

LTTE Attempts Attack on Colombo

12. (SBU) At approximately 8:30pm on February 20, two small aircraft took off from remaining LTTE-controlled territory east of Puttukkudiyiruppu (PTK) to conduct a raid on Colombo. The Government shut off power to Colombo to thwart target identification by the incoming aircraft. The Sri Lankan Air Defense System's anti-aircraft artillery began firing into the air above the city as the planes entered Colombo airspace at roughly 9:45pm. One of the planes, whose target may have been the Sri Lankan Air Force Headquarters in downtown Colombo, exploded on impact with the nearby Internal Revenue Department building. Two persons were killed and about 50 injured. The second plane was downed near the Colombo airport. Both planes reportedly contained C4, indicating the raid was intended as a suicide mission.

13. (SBU) The LTTE's desperate attempt to gain a "victory" in the face of its military defeat in the North surprised many who believed (as the Government had previously claimed) that all remaining LTTE airstrips had been captured as the military advanced on most former LTTE-controlled territory. The LTTE was believed to have at most five planes; it is not known with certainty how many, if any, aircraft the LTTE still has.

Results of UN U/SYG Holmes Visit

14. (SBU) UN U/SYC for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Sir John Holmes ended his three day visit to Sri Lanka on February 21. His public pronouncements, while widely reported by the press, did not rock the boat. However Holmes' private meetings with senior Government officials provided an opportunity for the UN to push for continued access to internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing the conflict zone and for improved coordination overall with the Government on humanitarian issues.

15. (SBU) On February 22, UN Resident Representative Neil Buhne discussed the completed UN U/SYG visit with Ambassador. He noted that Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa confirmed to U/SYG that the Government will not try to separate the cadres from the IDPs, but instead will wait for them to "trickle out" along with the civilians and screen them out later. Buhne reported that the

Government reiterated its strong commitment to provide daily food shipments to 70,000 or more IDPs. However, Buhne highlighted that medical issues are a continuing concern for humanitarian agencies; only Panadol (acetaminophen) and a few other supplies were permitted into the safe zone in the February 19-20 shipment by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). He noted that access to the IDP camps by the UN and NGOs is good, and that access to IDP screening and registration is somewhat improved. UNHCR now has full access to Omantai where IDP registration is taking place, but neither UN nor ICRC are permitted in Kilinochchi where IDPs are being screened for arms. Buhne conceded it was possible IDPs could "disappear" between Kilinochchi and Vavuniya, but said UN protection experts in Vavuniya have not heard many credible reports of disappearances.

16. (SBU) According to Buhne, the Government agreed that IDPs who have identification cards will be granted some freedom to move in and out of the camps, "but not complete freedom." Buhne believes this could represent progress. However, post believes this could also indicate the Government intends to enact similar restrictions as seen in Sirukandal and Kalimoddai camps in Mannar. The UN and Embassy have raised concerns about restrictions on freedom of movement in these camps.

Assistance to IDPs

17. (U) The ICRC completed its fourth medical evacuation from Mullaitivu on February 21, returning approximately 400 wounded to Trincomalee. This brings total medical evacuations since February 11 to approximately 1600. A representative of the US Mission arrived in Trincomalee on February 22, and will meet with evacuated civilians.

18. (SBU) On February 20, Ambassador held a meeting with Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva. De Silva described additional measures taken to support IDP populations in Vavuniya, including eventual placement of 250 new doctors in the Vanni Region, creation of a Government health post at each of the transit camps, and the dispatch of a mobile laboratory to Vavuniya. De Silva also noted that all local hospitals in the north were operating at maximum capacity and that their ability to respond is constrained by the

tight security in the area and fear of suicide attacks. He requested additional supplies to meet the surge in needs (preventative and curative), and potentially the need for additional doctors and mobile infrastructure (examination tents) as IDPs were now occupying most of the vacant buildings in Vavuniya. (Note: an NGO contact reports that the Vavuniya Hospital is now overstretched, but that hospital staff have been instructed to submit requests to the Ministry of Health, not work directly with international organizations.)

¶19. (U) USAID-funded NGO partner United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) reported that they were able to visit four transit sites in Vavuniya last week. Cluster teams (UN/NGO interagency coordination meetings on protection, shelter, water/sanitation, etc.) are responding to the basic needs of the displaced, however, UMCOR reports that some gaps are appearing in the shelter and sanitation sectors. Family separation remains an acute problem.

¶10. (U) Food into Safe Zone: WFP continues to work with the Government on use of two tugboats now in Trincomalee with the potential to transport up to 300 MT of food per week to the safe zone. At present, the ICRC ferry has been able to take 10 MTs per trip. A vessel leaving on February 23 will carry 8 MTs of wheat flour, and 1 MT each of oil and sugar. ICRC advised that the Assistant Government Agent in Puthumathalan (within LTTE-controlled area) has people well organized for food distribution, as well as fishing boats to take the food from the tugs to the beach.

¶11. (U) Food to Vavuniya District IDP sites: Temporary kitchen facilities are being set up in all the transit sites. WFP has begun releasing dry rations for each site, working under agreements with local NGOs that pick up the food, deliver it to the sites, and oversee food preparation with the IDPs. WFP is awaiting final approval of its request for \$3.1 million in CERF funds for the procurement of local rice.

Reported Civilian Casualties

¶12. (SBU) The UN relayed a report of shelling of the perimeter of the safe zone on the night of February 22. The UN cannot determine the source of the shelling, and does not yet have information on any possible casualties. Tamil sources from within the LTTE-controlled area claim 125 civilians killed and 302 injured on February 20-22. Reportedly, 23 persons reached Government-controlled territory on February 22. (Note: Such reports from Tamil sources cannot be confirmed and are frequently exaggerated.)

MOORE